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Reviews in American History, Volume 29, Number 2, June 2001, pp. 271-280 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/rah.2001.0030*

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Regina Lee Blaszczyk. *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xiii + 363 pp. Illustrations, figures, notes, essay on sources, and index. $39.95.

The rise of consumerism has long occupied a prominent place in general accounts of the American past. Almost a half century ago, David M. Potter posited in his landmark *People of Plenty* (1954) that economic abundance was a defining feature of the American character. In 1973, Daniel J. Boorstin celebrated the emergence of "consumption communities" in his *Americans: The Democratic Experience*. More recently, Susan Strasser and Richard S. Tedlow have analyzed how mass merchandisers created a national mass market.[1] In addition, a legion of social and cultural historians has explored the complex and sometimes paradoxical relationship between mass marketing and American values.[2]

While these works differ in many respects, they share several common assumptions. Each dates the emergence of a modern consumer society to the period between the mid-nineteenth century and the Second World War. Each agrees that this development could properly be termed a "revolution" in the sense of being a significant, large-scale, and enduring change. And each shares Potter's conviction that *some* kind of relationship existed between institutional innovations and cultural norms. Few, of course, would be willing to generalize broadly, as Potter did, about the American character. Yet the notion that mass marketing has had a discernible effect on the wider society is relatively uncontroversial. Like the "transportation revolution," the "communications revolution," and other similar constructs that historians routinely invoke to make sense of the past, the "consumer revolution" is fast becoming something of a textbook cliché. To be sure, colonialists have long trumpeted the existence of a consumer revolution in the eighteenth century. Yet, with few exceptions, this work has had little effect on historians who set their sights on the less recent past.

Historical assessments of the moral import of consumerism are more divided. Some regard consumerism as a serious social problem, keeping alive a critical tradition that goes back at least as far as *fin-de-siecle* social critic

Reviews in American History 29 (2001) 271–280 © 2001 by The Johns Hopkins University Press

Thorstein Veblen. The most significant issue was not *whether* Americans desired material abundance, observed Susan Strasser in *Satisfaction Guaranteed* (1989), her provocative exploration of the making of the American mass market. The very title of her book made it plain that they did. Rather, Strasser warned of the *consequences* of consumerism for American society and the global environment. Consumption decisions might well be *personal*, Strasser observed, yet they have never been *private*. To reach any other conclusion was to subscribe to a "mythology of consumption" in which sovereign consumers benignly presided over an ever-expanding empire of goods (p. 290).

Not everyone, however, dismisses consumerism as a dangerous delusion. For a small but growing number of mostly younger historians, the acquisition of consumer goods becomes a morally neutral or even laudable pursuit. Inspired by the cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas, these revisionists praise material objects as things of beauty, emblems of personal identity, and repositories of shared meaning. Without necessarily endorsing conspicuous consumption, they deride taste-based distinctions as cultural snobbery and elevate consumer sovereignty into a populist rallying cry.

Among the most spirited and suggestive of the recent works in this revisionist tradition is Regina Lee Blaszczyk's *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning*. Long awaited by specialists, *Imagining Consumers* is an engagingly written, solidly researched, and copiously illustrated monograph on the marketing of home furnishings in the United States. Suitable for adoption in upper-level courses in business history, American studies, popular culture, and the history of the decorative arts, it cogently makes the case for those who hail consumerism as a defining feature of the modern democratic creed.

Blaszczyk's subject is the design and marketing by American home furnishing firms of glassware, china, and plumbing fixtures in the period between the Civil War and the Great Depression. Among the firms she singles out for detailed treatment are Libbey Glass, Homer Laughlin China, Kohler, and Corning. Though the eighteenth-century English pottery firm, Wedgwood, is featured in the book's subtitle, Blaszczyk devotes relatively little space to the years prior to the Civil War, or to the marketing in the United States of products that had been originally manufactured abroad.

In lesser hands, a survey of changing fashions in glass decanters, tea sets, and bathroom accessories might well have been of interest only to museum curators, collectors, and connoisseurs. Yet Blaszczyk's historical vision never falters, and, by artfully weaving into her narrative a host of illuminating details, she renders always intriguing, and sometimes compelling, a topic that might well have been massively dull. Few readers will come away from her book without learning something new and important about modern con-

sumer society. This reviewer, for one, will never again look at quite the same way at the inherited china cabinet that dominates a wall of his dining room, or at the assorted pieces of glassware and china the cabinet proudly displays.

Blaszczyk's approach to home-furnishing design differs in several respects from that of specialists in the decorative arts. Having worked for a time as a curator at the Smithsonian's Museum of American History, she is well aware of the premises that inform the display of material objects. It is a mistake, she concludes, to treat glassware and china design as the product of high-culture tastemakers, as museum curators are wont to do. Home-furnishing design, instead, is best understood as a fruitful *collaboration* between market-savvy entrepreneurs and the millions of customers who purchased their wares. By successfully "imagining consumers," Blaszczyk contends, skilled "fashion intermediaries" stalked the butterfly of taste.

Should Blaszczyk's views prevail, the canon of American decorative arts would significantly expand. No longer constrained by a "'masterpiece' approach" that privileges the rare and the technically refined, museum curators would henceforth make room in their galleries for such mass-market staples as Fiestaware, Pyrex dishes, and the matching dishes that working-class women purchased at the five-and-ten. Museum curators, Blaszczyk complains, have a "vested interest" in highbrow culture that leads them to presume the existence of a "unified aesthetic" predicated on "high-class definitions of beauty." In reality, no such unified aesthetic has ever existed: The "building blocks of popular culture" consist not of the relatively small number of masterpieces that curators cherish, but of the much larger array of relatively commonplace objects that they routinely ignore (p. 273).

Had Blaszczyk confined herself to skewering the assumptions of museum curators, she might well have done little more than stir up a tempest in a teapot. Yet this is by no means her only, or even her primary, goal. In addition, and more provocatively, she advances a pair of general propositions about the relationship between production and consumption. Her first proposition is that consumers and not producers were the principal agents in the making of the mass market. Manufacturers proposed, yet customers disposed. Her second proposition is that home-furnishing firms created the "most commonplace and meaningful" articles to have been spawned by the American consumer revolution (p. x). Glassworks and potteries, in particular, fostered the "passage to consumerism" by creating objects that consumers "imbued with meaning" (p. 272).

Firmly moored in the comparative institutional approach that has long been favored by business historians, *Imagining Consumers* provides us with a bird's eye view of the design process at individual firms. The "primary agents of innovation" within these firms were the men (and the occasional woman)

who mediated between the firm and the market—Jesse Dean in the Trenton pottery industry; Rudolph Gaertner and Frederick Hurton Rhead at Homer Laughlin China; Walter J. Kohler at Kohler; and Paul T. Cherington and Lucy M. Maltby at Corning (p. 12). Her real heroes, however, were the millions of ordinary Americans who bought, used, and cherished the glassware, china, and other home furnishings that these firms produced.

The vast majority of these consumers—as much as 80 percent, she estimates at one point—were women (p. 130). Male designers proposed; female shoppers disposed. Though we meet few female shoppers in person, they play a pivotal role in Blaszczyk's interpretative scheme. In contrast to proponents of the "hegemony school," such as Stuart Ewen, Blaszczyk contends that, at least in home furnishings, the consumer was indeed sovereign. However tempted home-furnishing executives might have been to rely on advertising or consumer credit to shape the market, the most successful readily conceded their subordination to the shifting patterns of consumer demand. Shoppers such as Nellie Petrowski—who, one surmises, is Blaszczyk's own mother—took tremendous satisfaction from the china dining set that Nellie's mother bought her with "blood money" during the darkest days of the Depression. Such objects, in turn, became for millions of women cherished expressions of who they were and what they yearned to become.

To make her case, Blaszczyk draws imaginatively on a wide range of primary sources. In addition to immersing herself in industry trade journals and conducting numerous interviews, she has mined several corporate archives, studied countless artifacts, and drawn extensively on both published primary and secondary accounts.

Blaszczyk's analysis builds creatively on Philip Scranton's influential analysis of manufacturing formats *other than* mass production. In *Endless Novelty* (1997), Scranton told the story of the large number of manufacturing firms that relied on specialty production. In *Imagining Consumers*, Blaszczyk showed how home-furnishing designers took advantage of the specialty format to keep up with rapid swings in market demand. Like Scranton, Blaszczyk picks a number of predictable—and, these days, almost ritualistic—quarrels with Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., whose *Visible Hand* remains, more than two decades after its publication in 1977, a touchstone for scholarship in the field. "Traditional Chandlerians," Blaszczyk complains, neglected the manufacturers and retailers who "made and sold goods that consumers used to construct personal identity" (p. 355). It was the specialty producer, she concludes—to a far greater extent than the Chandlerian mass production firm—that "ushered the transmogrification of a fragmented group of provision seekers into a nation of highly differentiated consumers" (p. 13).

Blaszczyk's critique of Chandler is well taken. Though Blaszczyk overstates the degree to which Chandler overlooked retail chains such as Woolworth's or department stores such as Wanamaker's, she is right to highlight his neglect of specialty production, as well as his indifference to the current scholarly preoccupation with identity formation. Neither Chandler nor his students have much concerned themselves with such matters, convinced, instead, that it was far more important to chart the internal dynamics of the nation's largest and most powerful firms.

Yet, in several respects, Blaszczyk and orthodox Chandlerians (including Chandler himself) share common ground. Both are more interested in success than in failure; both downplay the role of public policy in shaping business strategy; and both treat the market as an unpredictable and ever-changing exogenous force.

Consumer sovereignty is, of course, a cornerstone of much contemporary social thought, including neoclassical economics and the rational choice school in political science. Yet it is has never gone unchallenged among historians. For skeptics as otherwise diverse as Susan Strasser and William Leach, consumer sovereignty is disparaged as a misleading, and even dangerous, conceit. As they see it, consumers proposed, yet, in the end, corporations disposed.

Blaszczyk finds this critique unpersuasive. Though she had anticipated when she began her research that she would endorse the skeptics' view, diligent work in the sources has persuaded her otherwise. Among manufacturers of home furnishings, the most successful were those firms most adept at meeting changing trends in consumer demand. For Blaszczyk, this is compelling evidence that ordinary people—rather than corporate moguls—ultimately ran the show. In her telling, the Cinderella story—in which a frumpy maiden became a fashionable princess following the acquisition of a "portfolio of fashionable consumer goods"—is most emphatically not a debilitating myth ripe for critical scrutiny (p. 14). Rather, it is an empowering parable about the personal transformation that can accompany the purchase of cut-glass bowls and matching dishes. In Blaszczyk's America, consumers are sovereign, and Cinderella reigns.

No brief review can do justice to the artful and suggestive ways in which Blaszczyk develops her argument. Particularly effective are her vivid portraits of the fashion brokers who designed the products that American women most yearned to possess (p. 13). Foremost among these innovators was Frederick Hurten Rhead, a designer at Homer Laughlin China, one of the country's largest potteries. Though Rhead was himself, as an Englishman, the product of a highly status-conscious society, he recognized that, in the United States, a different set of fashion conventions prevailed. Schooled in the

implicitly egalitarian industrial tradition, with its deep-seated respect for the market, he refused to play tastemaker; instead, he relied on first-hand observation to unlock the mysteries of female desire. Newly arrived immigrant "shawl ladies," Rhead discovered, might well aspire to emulate Anglo-American fashion by purchasing dishes that matched—and perhaps, in so doing, cross the invisible line that separated those who dined from those who merely ate. Yet most American women were not Woolworth shoppers with Tiffany tastes. "Mrs. Vassar-Yale," the status-conscious, upper-middle-class matron, felt impelled to ape the latest European fashions; "Mrs. Jim Brown," however, the lower-middle-class dime-store shopper, yearned merely to own a pretty set of dishes. Though Rhead personally deplored bright and vivid colors as an offense against good taste, he recognized the appeal of such a "blatant" palate for the supposedly more primitive American masses and designed accordingly. Fiestaware, a mass-market crockery fad of the 1930s that Blaszczyk describes with loving detail, was the result.

Walter J. Kohler, the president of the plumbing supply house that bore his family's name, strove to nurture good citizenship by promoting the mass consumption of the "holy trinity" of sink, toilet, and bathtub. Kohler's model company town won him much favorable publicity, while his promotion of the sanitary benefits of porcelain bathroom fixtures helped alter buying habits. Yet Kohler lacked Rhead's familiarity with the industrial arts tradition, and, as a consequence, eschewed first-hand observation in favor of a national advertising campaign and the generous extension of consumer credit. Unfortunately for Kohler, this strategy had major shortcomings. Nothing, it turns out, could persuade Americans to purchase the Kohler electric sink—an early dishwater—or, with few exceptions, to order matching bathroom fixtures in any color other than white. Once again, the sovereign consumer prevailed.

Paul T. Cherington, a consultant for Corning, faced a somewhat analogous set of problems in his efforts to market Pyrex—a crack-resistant line of glassware that was Corning's first venture into the houseware market. Unconvinced that Rhead's "man-in-the-street" approach could adequately gauge consumer demand, Cherington relied instead on "reason why" advertising and market research. Cherington's techniques notwithstanding, Pyrex flopped with consumers. Only after Corning turned to home economist Lucy M. Maltby did managers learn why. No market research, apparently, could discern what Maltby's test kitchen revealed: Pyrex dishes were ugly and poorly designed.

In a final chapter, Blaszczyk surveys the history of houseware design since the Second World War. Challenged by the growing popularity of new materials, such as plastics, and threatened by foreign competitors emboldened by sharp reductions in the tariff, the domestic glassware and china industries

went into a steep, and presumably irreversible, decline. At various points, Blaszczyk hints, almost wistfully, that these reverses stemmed from the failure of business leaders to nurture a new generation of designers. Indeed, in her final paragraph, Blaszczyk goes so far as to suggest that, had managers discarded their myopic indifference to *male* consumers, American glassworks and potteries might well have continued to flourish as they had in the past (p. 276).

Blaszczyk is too good a historian to place much stock in such hypothetical musings. At numerous junctures, she documents the myriad contingencies that hastened the rise and fall of the various American manufacturers of glassware and china. One of these was the tariff. During the heyday of the glassware and china industries, domestic manufacturers enjoyed the protection of extremely high tariffs. Following the Second World War, these rates came down, with predictably disastrous results. Had legislators in the 1890s adopted a similar industrial policy, one wonders if even the most consumer-oriented of fashion brokers could have prevented female consumers from switching to cheap foreign-made goods. There is, in short, reason to question whether—even in the glory years of the American houseware industries—consumer sovereignty prevailed.

Further caveats are raised by the paucity of market-share data on American and foreign firms. In such a variegated industrial sector, of course, such figures would be notoriously hard to compile. Still, it would seem to be of some significance that, according to the census, between 1929 and 1939 well over 95 percent of *all* the pieces of china sold in the United States were made overseas.[3] If similar ratios prevailed in earlier years—as they almost certainly did—this would cast doubt on the tight link Blaszczyk's draws between female shoppers and home-furnishing designers. It would hardly seem likely, after all, for *foreign* china designers to have monitored the American market as closely as the American fashion brokers whose careers Blaszczyk chronicles in such illuminating detail.

The relative neglect of foreign glassworks and potteries is particularly significant, since, for most of the period Blaszczyk treats, they accounted for a substantial portion of housewares sold in the United States. To be sure, Blaszczyk highlights the importance of foreign imports at various points in her narrative (pp. 59, 109, 118, 130). Yet she refrains from undertaking a systematic comparison of American and foreign market shares, or, for that matter, devising product categories that would facilitate such a comparison. Given the myriad assumptions that such an investigation would entail, her restraint is entirely understandable. Yet it can invite misunderstanding. In generalizing about consumer demand, for example, she occasionally uses the term china as a synonym for *any kind* of decorative tableware. In discussing

the marketing strategies of particular American firms, such as Homer Laughlin China, however, she more commonly terms their output crockery or pottery, and restricts the term china to the high-end wares that, she repeatedly reminds us, were mostly manufactured overseas. Only if one adopts the former, more capacious, definition, could one plausibly conclude—as a casual reader might—that, in the period between the Civil War and the Great Depression, American firms manufactured the bulk of the china that Americans consumed.

It should hardly be an occasion for surprise that certain topics—such as foreign home-furnishing firms and the tariff—receive relatively short shrift in Blaszczyk's account. After all, she treats such a wealth of other subjects in illuminating detail that it would seem ungrateful to ask for more. Furthermore, at the present cultural moment, it is safe to say that neither foreign firms nor the tariff rival ordinary women as morally edifying historical actors. Still, her neglect of these factors does point to some limitations of her larger thesis. The goal of the consumer revolution, Blaszczyk declares in her introduction, is not the coercion of consumers but the satisfaction of "diversity" (p. 2). From such a standpoint, the tariff would seem to loom large as an impediment to change. After all, what could be more conducive to consumer diversity than a truly global market? Similarly, if large numbers of consumers continued to prefer foreign home furnishings *despite* their relatively high (tariff-inflated) cost, would this not call into question the marketing strategy of American firms? Almost a decade ago, Richard L. Bushman documented, in his landmark *Refinement of America* (1992), that nineteenth-century Americans displayed an enduring preference for European designs. If the female shoppers who purchased glasswares and china fit this pattern, then should museum curators be faulted for featuring foreign-made products in their displays? Or, at the very least, ought not a truly comprehensive history of the mass marketing of housewares *combine* Blaszczyk's novel focus on retail chains such Woolworth's (which specialized in American-made glasswares and china) *with* the better-known story of department stores such as Wanamaker's (which featured foreign imports)?

Questions such as these testify to Blaszczyk's success at provoking fresh thinking. And this is all to the good. For a large and growing number of historians, consumerism is coming to rival the middle class as an abstract, vaguely progressive first mover that is seemingly always on the rise. If this concept is to retain its explanatory power, it would seem to be incumbent to clarify its meaning. In particular, one wonders *how*, precisely, mass-market goods such as housewares shaped personal identity. Though Blaszczyk assumes that such a relationship exists, she leaves it for others to explore its logic. How, for example, might housewares stack up against non-material

determinants of personal identity, such as religion or ethnicity, or, for that matter, other material artifacts, such as clothing, furniture, or books? It would also be useful to test Blaszczyk's counterintuitive claim that minimally advertised, batch-produced home furnishings, such as china, were *more important* in shaping personal identity than nationally advertised, mass-produced consumer durables such as automobiles. Is it not at least conceivable that Blaszczyk may have unconsciously exaggerated the cultural significance of, say, china sets, by projecting onto them the associations that they have come to acquire as they are lovingly passed from generation to generation?

Two decades ago, the commodification of desire was a cause for concern. Today it is fast becoming an occasion for celebration. Some readers will find Blaszczyk's forthright endorsement of consumerism refreshing. Others will endorse Strasser's critique of the materialistic yearnings that Blaszczyk applauds. Still others will remain wedded to the Chandlerian presumption that, in the end, the most pivotal economic transformations began in the largest and most powerful firms.[4] Wherever one stands on these particular issues, Blaszczyk's rich and rewarding monograph will be where it belongs—in the thick of the debate.

Richard R. John, associate professor, University of Illinois at Chicago, is the author of "Elaborations, Revisions, Dissents: Alfred D. Chandler, Jr.'s., *The Visible Hand* after Twenty Years," *Business History Review* 71 (Summer 1997): 151-200, which was awarded the 1997 Newcomen Prize for the best article in the *Business History Review*. He is currently working on a history of communications in industrial America.

1. Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (1989); Richard S. Tedlow, *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* (1990). The existence of these well-regarded works serves as a reminder that, her publisher's blurb notwithstanding, *Imagining Consumers* is *not* the first book to tell the story of American consumer society from the perspective of mass-market manufacturers and retailers.

2. Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (1998); William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (1993); Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (1994); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (1995); Olivier Zunz, *Why the American Century?* (1998); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (1985); Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (1998); Pamela Walker Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (1998). See also Roger Horowitz and Arwen Mohun, eds., *His and Hers: Gender, Consumption, and Technology* (1998).

3. Percy W. Bidwell, *What the Tariff Means to American Industries* (1956), 49.

4. To a certain extent, these differences in perspective are generational. For Chandler, the intellectual agenda of American business history was recast by the Second World War. Troubled by the prospect of future Hitlers or Stalins, he dedicated himself to explaining how

and why the United States had become the arsenal of democracy. From such a standpoint, the rise of consumerism was a decidedly secondary concern. For Strasser, in contrast, the most salient context was not the Cold War, but the environmental movement. Here, of course, consumerism looms large as a social, cultural, and ecological threat. Blaszczyk's principal frame of reference—as she candidly revealed in a magazine interview occasioned by her book's impending release—was, instead, the seemingly unbridled consumerism of the 1980s. From this angle of vision, the radical critique of consumerism seemed dated, the relationship between material acquisition and personal identity self-evident, and the discovery that women were key actors in the fashion system "politically charged." "Consuming Interests," *Boston Phoenix*, May 6–13, 1999.